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DE RUEHKA #0617/01 1681123
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9039
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 2122
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON PRIORITY 2875
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0163
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC PRIORITY
RHHJJPI/PACOM IDHS HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000617

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NEW DELHI FOR FAS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/14/2019

TAGS: PREL PGOV ETRD ECON EAGR PHUM KPAO SOCI BG
SUBJECT: A/S BLAKE OUTLINES NEW AREAS OF COOPERATION FOR
BANGLADESH FOREIGN MINISTER

REF: A. DHAKA 419
1B. DHAKA 431
1C. DHAKA 443
1D. DHAKA 120
1E. DHAKA 345
1F. DHAKA 474
1G. USUN 528

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Bangladesh's top two foreign affairs officials welcomed prospects for collaboration with the United States in areas like climate change, food security and building stronger U.S. relations with the Muslim world. South and Central Asia Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake and the Ambassador highlighted USG interest in expanding U.S.-Bangladesh relations in these directions during calls with Bangladesh's Foreign Minister, Dipu Moni, and State Minister for Foreign Affairs Hasan Mahmud. As a moderate Muslim democracy in an impoverished, overpopulated and low-lying country, Bangladesh is a prime candidate to partner with the USG in advancing these objectives. The Foreign Minister also highlighted the Awami League government's determination to proceed with war crimes trials, though she noted the government's intention to proceed cautiously and adhere to international standards of due process.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND CLEAN ENERGY

12. (C) Mitigating the effects of climate change and promoting use of clean energy were top priorities of President Obama and Secretary Clinton, A/S Blake told Bangladesh's Foreign Minister and State Minister for Foreign Affairs June 14, during the Assistant Secretary's inaugural visit to Dhaka. Foreign Minister Moni said Bangladesh needed technical, as well as financial, assistance to combat the effects of climate change in Bangladesh -- one of the nations which would be worst affected by rising sea levels.

13. (C) State Minister Hasan Mahmud, the Awami League party's point man on the environment, said Bangladesh was already committing its own funds to address climate change. He noted

the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) had allocated \$45 million toward a climate change trust fund during the fiscal year ending June 30 and had committed an additional \$120 million to the trust fund for the upcoming fiscal year.

¶4. (C) Using renewable energy sources was a related priority of the GOB, Mahmud said. Solar energy had great potential, according to Mahmud, who said the number of solar panels used in Bangladesh was likely to quadruple between 2008 and 2010. Mahmud added that the GOB budget for FY2009-10, unveiled June 11, included tax breaks and reduced import duties for renewable and energy efficient technologies.

FOOD SECURITY

¶5. (C) Foreign Minister Moni told A/S Blake the GOB had renewed its focus on achieving food self-sufficiency, following several years when food security was a lower priority. Given the precarious existence of most Bangladeshis, food security was "always on our minds," Moni said. State Minister Mahmud observed that the Prime Minister was focused on dredging Bangladesh's inland waterways, not only to mitigate the effects of annual flooding, but also to improve irrigation and possibly increase the amount of land farmers could cultivate.

THE PRESIDENT'S SPEECH: RESONATING IN BANGLADESH

¶6. (C) Both Ministers warmly welcomed the President's June 4 Cairo speech that had reached out to the Muslim world.

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Minister Moni said the President's words echoed the thoughts and values of almost all Bangladeshis. A/S Blake noted that Bangladesh was already working on many of the priorities the President had identified in his speech, including improving education and empowering women. Blake said Bangladesh's work in these areas could become a model for other countries in the Muslim world.

¶7. (C) Moni observed that Bangladesh's recent elections, during which voters embraced the secular and pluralistic values of the Awami League, were proof that Bangladesh opposed terrorism and extremism. Mahmud said the GOB was keen to address the roots of extremism by reforming the nation's madrasa system (Refs A-C). The GOB was intent on bringing unregulated madrasas, known as qawmi madrasas, into the mainstream education system. The GOB would not impose rules or curriculum on the qawmi madrasas; rather, it sought to work collaboratively with madrasa leaders, Mahmud said. The GOB also planned to provide incentives for madrasas to join the mainstream, through subsidies and contributions to teacher salaries.

COUNTER-TERRORISM COOPERATION

¶8. (C) A/S Blake thanked the Ministers for the GOB's strong cooperation on USG counter-terrorism priorities and highlighted ongoing U.S.-Bangladesh CT collaboration. Both Ministers emphasized the Awami League's commitment to regional CT cooperation and the GOB's responsibility to pursue transnational terrorists within Bangladesh, even if the terrorists' targets were other nations in the region and the world. Mahmud said the GOB had discussed the Prime Minister's South Asian Regional Task Force proposal with India but added the proposal was still in the consultation stage. He noted the challenges of creating a viable task force that included both India and Pakistan.

HUMAN RIGHTS

¶9. (C) A/S Blake said the USG's ability to work with CT

agencies like the Rapid Action Battalion was constrained by ongoing problems with extra-judicial killings and custodial deaths. Blake noted USG interest in supporting Bangladesh's security reform efforts, but emphasized that security forces had to be held accountable for abuses. The Foreign Minister acknowledged the concerns regarding extra-judicial killings and custodial deaths and said Bangladesh's leaders expected "not just zero tolerance, but also better results" from investigations into abuses. The State Minister added that the past environment of impunity would not be tolerated; suspects of abuses would be investigated and punished.

WAR CRIMES

¶10. (C) Foreign Minister Moni raised the Awami League government's commitment to moving forward with war crimes trials related to killings and human rights violations during Bangladesh's 1971 War for Liberation (Refs D-E). Moni acknowledged A/S Blake's observation that such a process should not be politicized and said firmly the trials were critical to healing the nation's wounds. Moni said the process would not be a hasty one and would adhere to international standards of due process and accountability. "This will not be victor's justice," she said.

ECONOMIC RELATIONS

¶11. (C) The Ministers, A/S Blake, and the Ambassador agreed there was huge potential for increased trade and investment between the United States and Bangladesh. State Minister Mahmud advocated for the passage of legislation that would give Bangladeshi-made garments duty-free access to U.S. markets. A/S Blake countered that Bangladesh would be better off if it directed its significant talents and industriousness to expanding its export base. Bangladesh

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could easily match its success in apparel in other product lines. A/S Blake also noted that Bangladesh needed to create a favorable business climate, particularly for foreign firms, if it wanted to attract increased investment. Proposals like the one that would force foreign shipping firms into joint ventures with local shippers sent bad signals to investors and hurt Bangladesh's reputation as an attractive destination for investment. (NOTE: In a subsequent meeting, Prime Minister Hasina informed A/S Blake that the GOB had decided not/not to force wholly-owned foreign shipping agencies to sell a portion of their business to local shipping agencies. Septel. END NOTE.)

COMMENT

¶12. (C) A/S Blake's meetings with the Ministers went a long way toward building ties between the new U.S. Administration and Sheikh Hasina's government. Both Ministers gratefully acknowledged the key role played by the United States in helping Bangladesh return to democracy through the recent elections. They also acknowledged a strong commonality of priorities and values between the United States and Bangladesh. Bangladesh can be an important partner to the United States as it reaches out to the Muslim world.

¶13. (C) Foreign Minister Moni laid down a marker on war crimes trials, perhaps in response to Pakistan's lobbying of the USG and the United Nations that such trials could distract the Pakistan Army from its mission to root out the Taliban (Refs F-G). It may be useful for the Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues to visit Bangladesh to help us monitor the GOB's pursuit of war crimes.

¶14. (U) A/S Blake cleared this cable.

MORIARTY